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ABSTRACT

A discussion of the relationship between second language acquisition (SLA) and foreign language learning (FLL) focuses on how theory influences language teaching. It is noted that SLA research has brought new interest in teaching materials and methodologies to many in the foreign language profession, but that there are also many who, impatient with efforts to define constructs, elaborate theories, and build a research base, are ready to accept simple solutions to complex problems. Current debate over the appropriateness of proficiency guidelines and renewed emphasis on error correction are illustrative of this trend. More positively, there are widespread efforts to modify and expand existing programs to reflect current second language learning theory. FLL researchers are looking increasingly at the classroom as a language learning environment and participating in research-oriented language teacher education programs, and opportunities for publishing related research findings are growing. On the other hand, while the field of SLA research is expanding, classroom learning has not been a significant focus. It is concluded that the foreign language profession has already benefitted from SLA research, but that SLA research must increase its attention to the classroom learning context and develop relevant theory. (MSE)

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In Second Language Acquisition/Foreign Language Learning, Nothing is More Practical than a Good Theory.

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IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION/FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING, NOTHING IS MORE PRACTICAL THAN A GOOD THEORY

Sandra J. Savignon

The relationship of SLA and FLL to be explored in this paper is that of how theory impacts upon teaching. While some would argue that the classroom context is so different from the naturalistic or L2 environment as to render SLA research suspiciously relevant, I suggest that classroom teaching has already benefitted by new conceptualizations of acquisition (e.g.what are learner strategies? what is the nature of learner language?). In order to account for many foreign language professionals' rejection of SLA research and theorizing, I first examine how and why many professionals are impatient with theory and what the results of this impatience are. Next, I discuss the development of theory building in second/foreign language learning and what the relationship of the classroom can and might be to developing a theory of SLA. I will conclude by remarking on why teachers need theory and how theory and research should be viewed within the field of foreign language education.

INRODUCTION

In addressing the relationship between the fields of second language acquisition (SLA) and foreign language learning (FLL), three fundamental questions come to mind from the foreign language learning perspective:

(1) How does the FL profession benefit from SLA research?

(2) What impact can/does FLL research have on SL perspectives?

(3) Is FL classroom learning similar to or different from non-classroom learning?

Of course, the FL profession benefits from SLA research. Discussions of classroom teaching increasingly include reference to data on learner strategies and the nature of learner language. And error analysis has replaced constrastive analysis as the perspective from which to make judgments regarding learner difficulties. Teachers today look to research, both inside and outside the classroom, for insights regarding their role in the language learning process.

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Conversely, classroom learning brings a needed dimension to SLA research. Whether in immersion, intensive, or more conventional core academic programs, whether in host (i.e. L2), bilingual, or L1 environments, classrooms constitute contexts of learning the world over. As such, they present a challenge to SLA researchers. A comprehensive theory of L2 learning is one that will account for individual and group differences in rate and outcome of learning, regardless of where it occurs. No easy task, to be sure, and one that has intrigued scholars and philosophers for centuries.

Granted, not everyone holds this view. Not all so-called "foreign" language teachers are interested in SLA research findings. Some see the classroom as so different from what have been termed "natural" learning environments that they are reluctant to consider findings related to the latter. Rather than seek ways to manage classroom learning environments to make them more conducive to L2 acquisition, they shut the door, so to speak, on acquisition data. In so doing, they often shun theory - be it linguistic, sociolinguistic, psycholinguistic, psychometric - in favor of what they see as more "practical" matters. In place of theory or research data to support their claims as to what "works" in language teaching and evaluation, they appeal to logic and/or experience, that is to say, tradition. "Experientially based" is the term they sometimes use to suggest that a practice is valid.

To give an example, in his book, An integrated theory of language teaching, subtitled and its practical consequences, Hammerly(1985) has the following to say:

> One condition absolutely essential to natural language acquisition, being surrounded by, and constantly interacting with, native speakers, will never exist in second language classrooms. The impossibility of recreating natural language conditions in the classroom means that any claims to success by naturalistic methods should be viewed with great caution. (p. 15).

He goes on to advocate a surface structure to meaning, or "skill-getting to skill-using," sequence in language teaching, justifying his stance with "It seems only logical that a language form should come under some degree of control before it is used" (p. 25).

IMPATIENCE WITH THEORY

While SLA research has brought new interest in teaching materials and methodologies to many in the FL profession, still others, impatient with efforts to define constructs, to elaborate theories, and to build a research base, seem ready

to accept simple solutions to complex problems. The current debate within the American FL profession regarding the appropriacy of the Proficiency Guidelines being promoted by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) is a case in point.

At conferences held recently in Dallas (ACTFL/AAL co-sponsored workshop on the ACTFL /ETS Proficiency Guidelines, 24 November 1986) and in Bloomington, Indiana (Indiana University Symposium on the Evaluation of Foreign Language Proficiency, 4-6 March 1987), discussion focused on the need to define communicative competence and to demonstrate the construct validity of tests that purport to measure communicative language ability (Savignon 1985, Bachman and Savignon 1986).

The inadequacy of the Guidelines as a basis for methods and materials development has been signaled repeatedly, e.g. Savignon (1985), Bernhardt (1986), Lantolf and Frawley (1986), VanPatten (1986), Lange (1987), Lee (1987), and Lee & Musumeci (in press). Kramsch (1986) has summarized the inappropriateness of their neo-behavioristic perspective for American school programs:

> ...the oversimplified view on human interactions taken by the proficiency movement can impair and even prevent the attainment of true interactional competence within a cross-cultural framework and jeopordize our chances of contributing to international understanding. The suggested proficiency-oriented ACTFL/ETS goals differ from interactional goals on three accounts: (1) they focus on behavioral functions rather than on conceptual notional development; (2) they have a static rather than a dynamic view of content; (3) they emphasize accuracy to the detriment of discourse aptitude. (p. 367).

Yet the guidelines continue to be promoted by ACTFL as a universally valid measure of L2 ability (ACTFL 1986, emphasis added):

> The 1986 proficiency guidelines represent a hierarchy of global characterizations of integrated performance in speaking, listening, reading, and writing....each level subsumes all previous levels, moving from simple to complex in an "all-before-and-more" fashion.
>
> Because these guidelines identify stages of proficiency, as opposed to achievement, they are not intended to measure what an individual has achieved through specific classroom instruction but rather to allow assessment of what an individual can and cannot do, *regardless of where, when, or how the language has been learned or acquired.*

The accompanying claim that the guidelines are "not based on a particular linguistic theory or pedagogical method," is clearly misleading; and persons who have been involved in writing the guidelines are indeed prescribing methods and materials for "proficiency," e.g. Omaggio (1986).

Another example of an apparent impatience for theory and research within the FL profession can be seen in the current promotion of an equally neo-behavioristic claim: that early encouragement of communication without strict "error correction" - that is, consistent teacher highlighting of differences between learner language and a selected adult native norm - results in the formation of undesirable and permanent L2 "habits." Among the terms used to characterize the end result of this undocumented phenomenon are "fossilization,""pidginization," and a "terminal 2 profile." The term "undocumented" seems warranted because, in fact, there is no research evidence to support the purported link between teacher correction practice and formal features of learner language. Debate on this issue has become so heated, however, that the claims being made merit more careful examination.

Since no one would presumably wish on another the fate of a terminal anything, much less a terminal 2, and since classroom teachers are understandably concerned about the futures of their students, the spectre of "terminal 2" is indeed a frightening one. The reference most frequently given by those who wish to emphasize morpho-syntactic "accuracy"- that is, adult native sentence-level grammar - in the oral expression of beginning L2 learners is Higgs and Clifford (1982) . (For examples of such reference, see VanPatten, in press.) The following oft-cited observations by Higgs and Clifford appeared in a collection of papers commissioned by ACTFL and edited by Higgs (1982):

> The most recent buzz word to hypnotize the profession--and the one that will occupy our attention throughout this chapter--is communicative competence. ...[There is] the widespread impression that communicative competence is a term for communication in spite of language, rather than communication through language. As a result, the role of grammatical precision has been downplayed, particularly by some who carry the banner of communicative competence...
>
> With an eye to identifying terminal 2s and otherwise analyzing the constituent component of student's language abilities, the CIA Language School has developed the Performance Profile reporting form...The explanation for the terminal profiles appears to lie in what cognitive psychology calls proactive interference, in which the prior learning of task A interferes with the current learning of task B.

...

> If proactive interference underlies the learning disabilities of the terminal 1+ and 2+ students, then there should be identifiable features in the background of each that inhibit their continued language development. Fossilized or terminal language development has been found to be the most commonly shared feature in the language-learning experiences of these students....The terminal cases whose foreign-language background had included only an academic environment all came from language programs that either were taught by instructors who themselves had not attained grammatical mastery of the target language--and hence were unable to guide their students into correct usage--or by instructors who had chosen not to correct their students' mistakes for philosophical, methodological, or personal reasons. (pp. 57-68).

The authors' failure to offer rigorous experimental data in support of claims that have appeared in a major foreign language publication has not gone unnoticed. In a fall 1986 graduate seminar on the psycholinguistic foundations of L2 teaching, my students and I looked at this and other reports related to claims bearing on teacher error correction and the development of learner language ability. What follow are excerpts from assessments by two participants that together rather effectively summarize our conclusions:

> (1) Higgs and Clifford inextricably tangle the data, pseudo-data, and forensic language meant in support of their arguments about structure and grammar in FL teaching. I will try to sort the lot into main categories of anecdotal opinion and hearsay, citation and quotation, and formal data from review and experiments. ...Is an opinion a datum? Higgs and Clifford assert that their anecdotes and reflections, based on their "vast experience", constitute "experiential...data." Such data are in nature unquantifiable and unverifiable. As used here they are also fanciful.. From them are formed aggregate battalions such as "most of us," "the profession at large," "we and our student clients," ..."the typical university-level foreign language major," which are marshalled against battalions of "those who would carry the banner of communicative competence."
>
> (2) Higgs and Clifford seem to have come to the conclusion that the phenomenon of the "terminal 2" can be directly attributed to (i.e. blamed on) those who "carry the banner of communicative competence." The authors have concluded that the communicative approach has "an early emphasis on unstructured communicative activities--minimizing or excluding entirely, considerations of grammatical accuracy" (1982:73) and

that its "undesirable side effect" is irreversible fossilization. Thus it is hypothesized that the problem, as they see it, can be remedied by early and intense emphasis on grammatical acuracy--the "accuracy first" approach.

What are the data on which these findings are reported? Let's see...we have "the data," and "data reported elsewhere in the literature;" and we have lots of experience: "vast experience," practical experience," "experience in government language schools," and the authors' "encounters" and "more than passing acquaintances." Let us not forget the ever-impressive evidence cited by the authors: "evidence suggests," and "evidence abounds." In short, Higgs and Clifford base their arguments primarily on experiential data. Were I to submit an academic paper full of as many unsubstantiated claims, I would most certainly be laughed out of graduate school. Such a report would never be tolerated, let alone taken seriously enough to serve as a major source of support for a movement in second and foreign language teaching. The obvious question is why has this report been taken so seriously, given its numerous oversights, shortcomings, and sweeping generalizations?

Why indeed? And yet this report currently provides the major support for claims regarding methodological focus, including error correction policy, in so-called "proficiency-oriented" methods and materials (e.g. Omaggio 1986). The attendent disregard for scholarship does much to undermine efforts to encourage dispassionate consideration of SLA research data. Rather, it promotes a persistent parochialism within the foreign language teaching profession that leaves it prey to what Maley (1984), in an affectionate spoof of language teaching ideologies, has called "I got religion: Evangelism in second language teaching!" Methods are promoted, their virtues extolled, with a fervor that discourages critical examination, or even explanation. One is asked simply to believe.

RESPONSIBLE THEORY BUILDING

But such is by no means the whole story of the SLA/FLL issue. On a much more positive note, there are many widespread efforts today to modify and expand existing programs to make them more reflective of current L2 learning theory. To cite examples from only North America, there are established immersion programs in Canada and the U. S. (Stern 1984a; Anderson and Rhodes 1984). The State of New York recently has mandated L2 experience for all learners, not only the college bound. State curricula have been revised to

emphasize functional goals accessible to all learners, with appropriate changes in teaching methodology. Even in college and university FL departments, bastions of tradition when it comes to language teaching, reassessment of goals, diversification of offerings, and increased student participation in study abroad programs have led in some cases to more communicatively oriented teaching. (See, for example, Freed, 1984).

Within the American FL profession, hopes are presently high for the National Foreign Language Center, to be established on the campus of the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies, Washington, D.C. In his statement of goals for the proposed Center, Lambert (1987) includes the development of 1) prototypical teaching and learning systems that would integrate classroom and informal learning; 2) prepared and authentic source materials for both overseas and domestic instruction; and 3) intensive and non-intensive programs of study. The proposal includes plans for establishing a "number of experimental classrooms and other research settings to evaluate the effectiveness of the new procedures and materials." (pp. 4-5).

Throughout his proposal, Lambert stresses the need for cumulative empirical research in foreign language teaching methodologies:

> [There is a] surprisingly weak tradition of empiricism in the search for what works and what does not work. In place of solidly grounded practice, we have wildly exaggerated claims for one or another way to teach a foreign language. In place of theory linked firmly to applied study, we have staunchly asserted opinions on how students learn. In place of carefully formulated relationships among practice, theory, research, and curriculum and materials development, we have teachers, theorists, researchers, and pedagogues each going their separate way. (p. 2).

Researchers, for their part, are looking increasingly at the classroom as a language learning environment; and responsible methodologists are careful not to make sweeping claims based on limited data. Thanks to the longitudinal data that has been collected in Canadian immersion programs, we now have a better understanding of the nature of learner classroom L2 interaction in that particular setting and of the communicative ability that develops. This interaction is seen in the broad context of communicative competence, in terms not only of sentence-level morpho-syntactic features, i.e. grammatical competence, but in terms of sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence (Lapkin and Swain 1984; Stern 1984b). Through the work of Breen and Candlin (1980), Long (1980), Felix (1981), Krashen (1982), Lightbown (1986), Beretta (1987), and others, we are gaining a better understanding of what goes on in immersion and other classroom learning environments and how they can be modified in the

interest of promoting SLA. A new collection of research papers devoted exclusively to classroom FL learning (VanPatten, Dvorak, and Lee 1987), the first such volume published in the U.S., to my knowledge, marks perhaps best of all the coming of age of FL classroom learning as a worthy research focus.

Some of the earliest classroom FL research was conducted here on the University of Illinois campus (Savignon 1971). The now well-known study of adult acquisition of French as a second language focused on the distinction between grammatical competence and a much broader communicative competence, assessing the value for adult learners of an opportunity to use French for communication from the very beginning of their study. The results have been widely cited and have become part of an ever-widening research effort directed at defining and promoting the development of communicative competence. (See, for examples, Savignon 1983, Savignon & Berns 1984, Savignon & Berns 1987.)

One of the first references to this research data appeared in a paper by a widely respected FL methodologist, Wilga Rivers (1972), who at the time was herself at the University of Illinois. The gist of her remarks was consonant with experimental findings, namely that learners who are not encouraged to go beyond repetition of memorized phrases, to take communicative risks, may never develop the negotiation skills necessary for L2 competence.

At the time, this appeared a startling revision of prevailing language learning theory, which cautioned against early learner self-expression. The fact, however, that Rivers found support for her revised views in classroom research data provided an example that other responsible methodologists would follow: Recommendations for improving classroom learning are best based, not on extrapolations from linguistic or psychological theory, but on systematic observation of classroom learners. The significance of this example for the FL profession becomes clear when we recall that just a few years earlier we were giving almost unanimous support to the promotion of a language teaching method with no basis whatsoever in observed language learner behavior. Nelson Brooks (1966) himself has acknowledged that acceptence of audiolingual theory required by and large "an act of faith; research to prove the validity of its basic principles is scanty." (p. 359).

In the intervening years a new research perspective has developed. To meet its demands, a new generation of FL researchers and methodologists has pursued advanced study that includes not only "foreign" language and culture, but the linguistic, social, and psychometric concepts related to language and language learning. They do so often with great difficulty. To understand the effort this involves, one has only to compare the master-level programs of graduate students in ESL with those in FL programs . While the former emphasize theory and research, courses in psycholinguistics,

psychometrics and SLA must compete in the latter with required advanced-level courses in literature, and civilization. Moreover, the multidisciplinary nature of these programs, while intellectually challenging, often places upon the degree candidates the additional burden of program coordination.

Support for research-oriented programs in FL learning/teaching is increasing, however. Our University of Illinois multidisciplinary SLATE (Second Language Acquisition and Teacher Education) doctoral program, for example, has brought together teachers, methodologists, and researchers from departments of Spanish, Italian and Portuguese, French, English as an International Language, linguistics, psychology, and the College of Education. Graduates of this and similar programs now occupy positions of responsibility for FL and ESL program coordination at major research institutions (Teschner 1987).

Opportunities for publishing research findings are also increasing. In addition to the major journals of applied linguistics, several language-specific journals now include discussions of SLA theory and research findings, e.g. Unterrichtspraxis and Hispania. Most important, perhaps, FL departments around the country advertise openings for methodologists with a research interest in SLA. Conferences such as the one held recently at the University of Illinois (SLA-FLL:On the Relationship between Second Language Acquisition and Foreign Language Learning, 3-4 April 1987), moreover, are further evidence of the support within the FL profession for SLA research. The support is welcome, for the research agenda is challenging.

NOTHING IS MORE PRACTICAL THAN A GOOD THEORY

While the field of SLA research is expanding, classroom learning has not been a significant focus of this research. To illustrate, Chaudron (1986) reports that of all the articles published in two major applied linguistics journals during a seven year period, fewer than 7% involved either qualitative or quantitative measures of classroom learning. A major barrier in such research, he points out, is the lack of well-defined classroom processes to serve as variables. Both qualitative and quantitative approaches are needed to 1)identify and describe classroom processes; 2) relate these processes to learning outcomes; 3) discover the nature of the relationships that are revealed.

Failure to adequately identify and describe classroom teaching methods was a major weakness of the methods comparison studies conducted in the 1960s, e.g. the Colorado Project (Scherer and Wertheimer 1964), and the Pennsylvania Project (Smith 1970). The blurring of distinctions in classroom

practice has been cited as a contributing cause in the outcome of "no significant difference" between audiolingual and cognitive code methods.

More recently, analysis of classroom processes has taken two related and complementary perspectives. The first of these is that of social patterns of participation, or interactional analysis, following Flanders (1970), and Cazden, John, and Hymes (1972). The second perspective is that of discourse analysis, teacher talk, the nature of linguistic input, e.g. Allwright (1980), Gaies (1977), Wells (1981), Guthrie (1984). But for each of these perspectives, the development and validation of adequate descriptive models of classroom processes are far from complete.

Another major barrier to discovering relationships between classroom processes and learning outcomes is the lack of agreement on what constitutes learning "success." The large-scale Pennsylvania Project (Smith 1970) included no measures of communicative competence. In some of the early Gardner and Lambert (1972) studies of attitudinal variables in classroom language learning, final grades in French literature courses served as achievement criteria. More recently, Hammerly (1985) has termed the Canadian French immersion programs "a linguistic failure," citing nonnative morpho-syntactic features of learner language. Stern (1984b), on the other hand, looking at the academic achievement cum functional L2 competence of immersion students, has called the program "highly successful and Krashen (1984) has termed it "[perhaps] the most successful programme ever recorded in the language teaching literature." (p. 61). To look at yet another indication of success, community support for immersion has shown impressive growth. About 165,000 Canadian students are currently enrolled in French immersion alternatives, and the number is increasing by about 20% a year (Canadian Parents for French 1986). That the majority of these children are no longer the high achievers once typical of such programs reflects their parents' view that immersion is a viable educational alternative for *all* learners, not just the academically talented (Wiss 1987).

In his evaluation of the activity- or task-oriented Bangalore Communicational Teaching Project (CTP) in South India, Beretta (1987) summarizes the quandry he faced in assessing learning outcomes:

> A search through the literature reveals that basically three procedures are used by evaluators in a bid to make their instruments program-fair: (1) a standardized text [sic] (2) a specific test for each program and (3) a test of common-unique elements. The appeal to standardized tests is based on their supposed neutrality, or their independence of either program. Their principal shortcoming lies in their considerable potential for insensitivity. Standardized tests are likely to be unresponsive to

features of either program, and consequently to contribute to an outcome of no difference. "No difference" on a standardized test may quite simply mean that distinct program characteristics have been obscured. On the other hand, specific tests for each program reflect their particular contents and objectives, but preclude direct comparison. The alternative is to identify common areas of content or common objectives, or both, in competing programs and to test these elements proportionately with elements that are unique to each program. Difficulties arise here when there is little apparent commonality.

.....

All pupils taking part in the evaluation [of communicational and structural methods] were at fairly elementary stages of language study. Pupils taught by the structural method are expected to achieve mastery of a limited set of structures prescribed by the syllabus for each year. Students in communicational programs are not expected to achieve mastery level until, presumably, nature has taken its course, a process that must extend beyond the elementary level. A conventional grammar test measures attainment or nonattainment of mastery. That is to say, it measures a prescribed quota of structures at the level of a fully formed competence. The CTP makes no claim of uniformity concerning which structures will be assimilated or what stage of development learners will have attained at each level. Therefore, at an elementary level, to compare both groups on a conventional grammar test would be perverse. It would mean counting the CTP chickens before they have hatched.

On the other hand, if the evaluation were taking place with advanced level students, then the notion of mastery would be applicable to both groups, because by that stage payoff in such terms could be plausibly demanded. Otherwise "incubation" would have to be dismissed as a luxury schools cannot afford. (pp. 93-94).

Learning success must be viewed in a broad framework that takes into account the nature of communicative competence. Much has been written about the importance of sociolinguistic perspective in developing L2 teaching methods and materials. Interest in communicative competence and in communicative language teaching as a means to that goal has been strengthened by the understanding of language and language behavior that comes from sociolinguistic research, research with which we associate the terms *varieties, use, norms, appropriacy.* Judging from current methods and materials, however, the message has yet to reach the wider U.S. FL profession. Communication is talked about, but most often as something learners "practice" after grammatical structures have been

presented and drilled.

In his 1984 book, A Place Called School, Goodlad (1984) offers a broader perspective on what is going on in American FL classrooms:

> Tests at both [junior and senior high school] levels stressed recall of specific information--for example, memorized grammatical rules in the junior highs and word and phrase recognition in both groups of schools. At the senior high level, there was considerable stress on technical mastery as demonstrated in short-answer tests and in taking dictation in the foreign language or translating from one language to another. Tests rarely called for writing original paragraphs or short essays. (p. 27).

Berns (1987) has eloquently summarized the relevance of sociolinguistic insight for language teaching, echoing many of the concerns highlighted by Kramsch (cited above):

> [We need] to promote teaching that is communication oriented in practice well grounded in theory. A sound basis for language teaching needs to be developed, troublesome shortcomings in existing frameworks for communicative language teaching need to be dealt with, and language teaching in general needs to reflect the realities of language use. In short, language teaching needs the sociolinguist.

CONCLUSION

To return to the questions posed at the outset of this paper, yes, the FL profession can and has benefitted from SLA research. Much evidence attests to the awakened interest of FL teachers/researchers in SLA research. Many graduate teaching assistants in large-scale university FL programs today seek teacher *education*, not training. They want to know the underlying theory behind the materials and methods they are being asked to use. And they want to know how that theory fits into a more general theory of SLA.

SLA research, on the other hand, cannot ignore the classroom learning context. Theories of SLA developed without serious reference to data from classroom settings provide inadequate explanation of the language acquisition process. Neglect of this context, characterized as it is by limited L2 exposure and interaction primarily with other nonnative L2 speakers, would be detrimental to further theory development. Yes, classroom contexts *are* different from other learning environments; and they constitute the most important, if not the sole L2 access for countless learners. *If* the goal of classroom learning is, in fact, some measure of communicative competence, then good theory building is the route to good

teaching practice.

There will remain those who disparage research. Frustrated by our inability to date to offer more than a general perspective on the language acquisition process, they call for practical solutions to immediate instructional and curricular problems. Tentative responses to immediate needs are fine, but they should not be viewed as solutions in and of themselves. Respect for a discipline must be earned through careful research, reporting of findings, and reasoned discussion of the implications. Above all, in the absence of compelling evidence, the temptation to make recommendations for classroom teaching must be resisted. When recommendations appear warranted, they should be stated dispassionately, and any reservations clearly noted. Such is and always has been the rule of scientific inquiry. Circuitous though the route may be, in the end, nothing is more practical than a good theory.

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